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SUBJECT: POLITICAL OBJECTIVITY OF NZ MEDIA QUESTIONED

WELLINGTON 00000105 001.2 OF 003

11. (SBU) Summary. The Labour Government's relationship with the New Zealand media has become increasingly tense and prompted Prime Minister Clark to call into question its behaviour and political objectivity. At the same time, opposition National Party leader John Key has received lighter press criticism, with Labour's dive in the February polls given front-page headlines and endless op-ed commentary suggesting the 2008 election is already over and Key has won. Political analysts (and some media) admit that Labour simply produces more grist for media comment than the opposition or minor parties. Once National begins to unveil more policy and a sense of how it will govern if elected, the media will provide greater scrutiny and any perceived notion of uneven media attention will dissipate. End Summary.

NZ Media Objectivity Called into Question

12. (SBU) Since the start of 2008 election year, the Labour Government and Prime Minister Clark have been regularly subjected to intense analysis and criticism by New Zealand's media. Conversely, the opposition National Party and its leader John Key have had far less scrutiny during this period. In response, the Government has lashed out repeatedly at the press, characterising the media as less than well-informed and calling into question journalists' objectivity. One of the country's most seasoned and well-respected journalists, Richard Harman, dismissed suggestions of media bias and offered that this was "par for the course." He noted that in the run-up to every election since the early 1970s he has been accused of bias by both major parties.

Fissure in the Labour-Press Relationship

13. (SBU) Since coming to power in 1999, Labour's relationship with the press has been reasonably good. However, in 2007 two pivotal events signalled that the character of this relationship was headed for a downturn. The first was the introduction of the highly contentious Electoral Finance Bill legislation, which sought to cap political campaign spending by an individual or organisation. The Bill sparked uniform, and often acerbic, press criticism of Clark and her Government; the media argued it was an abuse of power which unfairly restricted free speech. Leading the charge was The New Zealand Herald, the country's most widely read newspaper, which launched a visceral front-page campaign against Labour for introducing the Bill. Even though the Bill became law on December 19, 2007, the Herald's campaign continues unabated. The Herald publishes a monthly 'name and shame' graphic of the Labour MPs who voted for the Bill.

14. (SBU) The second event was a speech Clark gave shortly before the Electoral Finance legislation became law. Embattled by the steady diet of press condemnation about the Bill, Clark questioned the quality and judgment of New Zealand journalism. She asserted that Kiwi journalists lack general knowledge and are too young to remember seminal events in New Zealand's history. Citing the Herald's anti-Electoral Finance bill campaign as an example, Clark questioned whether journalists are upholding their professional duties to be truthful, fair and balanced. The Herald was not alone at the receiving end of Clark's wrath. She also singled out New Zealand's second largest newspaper, The Dominion Post and the Political Editor for TV3 News for criticism.

Clark Detects Right-Wing Bias in Some Publications

15. (SBU) In addition to questioning the professionalism of some journalists, Clark also suggested that Labour's difficulty in attracting positive press reviews in recent times was the result of an ideological bias against Labour. She believes that The New Zealand Herald, in particular, lacks objectivity and has a long-held political prejudice against Labour. On February 27, Clark accused The Herald of running "a silly campaign" against the Electoral Finance legislation and added that "it was a Tory paper which has shown no charity to Labour in the party's 91 years of existence." The paper rejected claims that its campaign is ideologically driven and maintained that it is simply fulfilling its role in questioning authority and meeting its obligation to guard against the outright abuse of power and constrictions against the freedom of speak.

16. (SBU) Clark's assertion of right-wing bias was not limited to the mainstream publications. In the March edition of the New Zealand Law Journal, its editor questioned whether free and fair elections could be held under new election funding rules. The editor also characterized present conditions in New Zealand under the new funding rules as "Putinesque." Clark responded by saying

WELLINGTON 00000105 002.2 OF 003

that such comments came as no surprise, given the editor was "at the opposite end of the political spectrum" from her. (Comment: Clark's remark is accurate regarding Law Journal editor Bernard Robertson. End Comment)

Liberal Media Also Critical of Clark

17. (SBU) Clark's assessment that competing ideology is behind some of the media's lack of enthusiasm towards her and Labour can, however, be challenged by the recent writings of Chris Trotter, New Zealand's most identifiable left-wing political commentator. Over the past month, Trotter has been sharply critical of Clark's ability to lead her party to victory in this year's election. In light of successive polls showing Labour well behind National in the party vote and Clark consistently coming in second to Key in preferred PM polling, Trotter has argued that Labour's only hope of winning the election is for Defence Minister Phil Goff to replace Clark as party leader. Another openly left-friendly writer, Matt MacCarten, has also been as critical of Labour and Clark in recent columns.

Journalist: Boredom Causing Uneven Media interest

18. (SBU) An Australian journalist who once reported on NZ politics for a major Australian newspaper and who also worked for The New Zealand Herald does believe that there exists an uneven balance of critical attention towards Clark and her Government at the expense of Key and his National Party. But according to Australian journalist Claire Harvey, this bias is not based on ideology. In a radio interview on March 9, Harvey opined that any bias against Clark and Labour is largely based on the NZ media's fondness for political novelty, with John Key representing a fresh face. Additionally, Harvey posits that NZ reporters implicitly yearn for a change in political management because they do not want to spend the next three years continuing to report of yet another Labour government consisting of many of the some personalities from

previous years. She believes that the NZ press are simply bored with Clark and Labour and claimed that "everything that needs to be written about this Labour Government has already been written."

Clark Finds Disfavor, Key Gets a Waiver

¶9. (SBU) Whereas the media appear to be relishing the problems facing Clark and Labour, with front-page banner headlines trumpeting its recent poor poll results, they seem to be savoring Key and his party's ascendancy in the polls. Notably, two of New Zealand most distinguished political commentators have all but anointed Key as the election victor. In his recent columns, The Herald's John Armstrong has referenced Key as the "Prime Minister-in-waiting." His Herald stable mate Colin James, normally seen to be relatively Labour-friendly, has been found to using "when" when talking about Key as Prime Minister, not "if." Moreover, in an address to the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs on March 11, James forecast that "Clark will likely give way to Key" at this year's general election. When asked by post to comment on perceived notions of media bias, James rejected the suggestion that he writes from one particular ideological perspective.

¶10. (SBU) Key has not been completely free from critical media scrutiny in recent times. In the week of March 3, Key received media criticism for a succession of gaffes he made relating to his misinterpretations of his party's policy and a lack of clarity on the issue of state asset sales. Some of this criticism from columnists, however, resembled advice rather than censure. Tracey Watkins of The Dominion Post, for example, appeared to warn Key that if he does not lift his game he would wear Labour's "slippery John" label. Journalists have told Post's Media Specialist that they are becoming very frustrated with National's lack of stated policy and its unwillingness to take positions on issues of public interest. They have noted that Key sometimes has reacted angrily to their desire to pin down his position on issues and they have wondered aloud how he will stand up to the rigour of an election campaign.

The NZ Media's Political Influence

¶11. (SBU) The degree to which mainstream media in New Zealand influence voting patterns is not fully defined. There is little capacity for editors and publishers to become political kingmakers nor is there great receptivity among the New Zealand public. Unlike in the United States, it is not customary for the mainstream media to explicitly endorse a candidate for political office. Moreover, the tighter controls on publishing political opinion, as a result of

WELLINGTON 00000105 003.2 OF 003

the new campaign funding rules, give the press little leeway to take a biased position. There does exist in New Zealand authentic political bias in the country's blogosphere, where some of New Zealand's main political pundits have their own blogs where they voice a more jaundiced perspective in contrast to their mainstream media reporting. However, the ability of the Internet to influence the political landscape is limited because in New Zealand its viral reach falls far behind that of the mainstream media.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) Clark is no different from most politicians who are predisposed to blame their political woes on the press. Nonetheless, her criticism that the media are pacing public opinion rather than simply reporting it has some validity and has raised questions from more neutral observers. However, Clark's hypothesis that the lack of positive stories on Labour and herself is ideologically motivated is excessive. The media's true bias is often conflict and political drama, which is most compelling to the general public - and Labour has provided a series of bad news stories since late last year that make for good copy and sell papers. One of Key's advisors also discounts that National is getting a free ride and has told us that the media can be just as vicious with National; he anticipates the press will be just as tough on a National Government, should it win, as they are with

Labour. End Comment.

McCormick